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## Film and Novel: Different Media in Literature and Implications for Language Teaching

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### Abstract

Film and novel are two main dominant media in literature. They exhibit great differences in terms of image vs. word, sound vs. silence, point of view, and time, and so on. The differences between novel and film leave a great many implications for language teaching. Film and video can be used to aid students' literacy. In view of the visual signs of the film, some opportunities can be created for students to pick up the non-verbal language. Students can also be encouraged to make video by themselves based on what they learn.

**Key words:** Film and novel; Implications; Language teaching

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### INTRODUCTION

Film and novel, as two main dominant media in literature, have attracted millions of people from all over the world. However, reading a novel and seeing a film are quite different experiences. Many films have been and are still being adapted from novels and therefore become one of the most easily accessible language products available to the students. Yet many teachers fail to realize their pedagogical values and are reluctant to use them in the classroom except as "a bit of time-filling end-of-term entertainment" (Voller & Widdows, 1993). In fact, just because film is associated with fun, they, if integrated with

novel, could be very motivating and useful in teaching. This paper, beginning with a discussion about the differences between film and novel, attempts to explore some constructive uses for film and video in the language teaching.

### 1. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FILM AND NOVEL

Film and novel, based on their different nature, have many differences in the way of telling stories, such as ways of narration, time and space, so on and so forth. Here, I would like to discuss some of the main differences in terms of image vs. word, sound vs. silence, point of view, and time, etc.

#### 1.1 Image vs. Word

The most obvious and most important difference between film and novel rests on the distinctive features of the two media they use in telling a story: image vs. word. The philosopher C. S. Peirce uses the terms "sign" and "icon" to distinguish the relationship between two things when one can represent another (Montgomery, 1992, p.193). A word can be a sign, which indicates an arbitrary relationship, and a photograph can be an icon, which represents a less arbitrary relationship. "As mediums of representation, film is made of icons, while prose is made of signs" (Montgomery, 1992, p.193). Therefore, the visual images in the film seem to have a more direct and immediate relationship to what they depict than the verbal words in the novel in view of the fact that the images resemble more to the reality. In this sense, the story presented by the film is much easier to be understood than that told by the novel, especially when certain cultural factors are involved. For example, when a Chinese reads the complicated description about a banquet in British context, he may still feel confused about what it is like even he can understand the meaning of all the descriptive

words in the novel. On the contrary, when presented the image directly in the film, he will grasp the main features of a banquet immediately, which is quite helpful in his understanding the plot of the story or even the author's intention of writing about this.

In contrast, the novel seems to be more oblique in its relationship to reality, considering that the world in the novel is gradually unfolded by the narrator. However, on the other hand, this allows readers to reread, reflect, appreciate what they have covered or imagine the following plot if they like, which seems impossible in seeing a film with the continuously moving images. In reading a novel, the readers can freely choose the speed and content of their reading, not necessarily paying attention to the text to the same degree. They may concentrate on a certain chapter of the novel or flexibly skip parts of the text. Montgomery's (1992, p.192) words seem to support this point of view: "Reading a prose novel is usually a solitary act and apparently allows greater degrees of discretion and control to the reader". Moreover, the verbal signs in the novel can well represent the art of language, which can be seen in the use of metaphor and irony, etc. For instance, in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1971), there is a famous sentence of irony: "'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess". People can appreciate it when reading the novel, but cannot feel the sense of irony when seeing a film. To some extent, the film also tries to approximate the ironies the novel develops in telling a story, but it cannot duplicate them. Just as Monaco (1981, p.33) argues, "Films have words too, of course, but not usually in such profusion and never with the concrete reality of the printed pages".

## 1.2 Sound vs. Silence

Sound is another medium used in the film to represent a story, while word is the only tool available in the novel. There are three kinds of sound in film: speech, music and noise. In certain situations, any of them alone could tell a story (Bo, 2008). The film could duplicate sounds in real life, which, accompanied by the moving light on the screen, can make people more actively participate in the experience of the story by arousing their senses of both vision and hearing. As a result, the audiences are more likely to be emotionally involved and, therefore, be able to feel what the characters feel and think what the characters think. The film creates varieties of atmosphere by using different sounds so that the audience could predict the following plot. For example, judging from the sweet background music of a certain scene or the fast beat music combined with extreme quiet darkness of night, the audience may immediately distinguish whether something romantic or horrible will happen next. However, as to the novel, it can only create the atmosphere by using the silent words, which makes it arbitrary in a way but leaves more space for the readers to imagine. Different readers may

have different interpretations of the verbal signs based on their different personal and cultural background and, thus, form different mental constructs of what is described in the novel, say, the appearance of a certain character.

## 1.3 Point of View

"Point of view", a term used for "describing and analyzing basic types of narration", refers to the "angle of vision from which a scene is presented" (Montgomery, 1992, p.184). In the novel, a story can mainly be narrated from 3 "points of view": the first person narrator, the limited third person narrator or the omniscient third person narrator (Gajdusek, 1988), while, in the film, the story is basically shown by using the device of "voice-over" (Lodge, 1996). It is true that the film sometimes tells stories from the point of view of the first person narrator, in which case *Bridget Jones* adapted by Andrew Wynford Davies serves as a good example. But, generally speaking, the film usually shows what happens as if it were through the eyes of a certain character rather than telling the story through the first person voice. Point of view, in this sense, is "a camera concept which describes what is seen by the camera" (Cickoglu, 2003). Moreover, in telling a story, the novel can use the technique "polyphony" (Ricoeur, 1986), which is not quite possible in the film. "Polyphony" is a term created by Dostoevsky to refer to a plurality of voices, that is, telling a story in many different voices: sometimes in the authorial voice, and sometimes in the voice of characters. Virginia Woolf's *the Waves* is a good example of such multiple voices. As an outsider, the omniscient narrator knows all the thoughts and feelings of the characters, frequently revealing to the readers, and occasionally goes in and out of the characters' mind and makes some comments on their action. This kind of style is in no way what the film can duplicate.

Seen from another perspective, however, it seems that the novel is more subjective in telling a story than the film since it is best equipped to express thoughts. In a novel, when the author gives comments on the characters' actions in the authorial voice or even when he expresses thoughts in the voice of the characters, he cannot help having his own personal view of point involved. "It is in fact difficult not to present experience subjectively in the novel, and difficult therefore not to privilege the character from whose subjective point of view the action is dominantly presented" (Lodge, 1996). Comparatively speaking, the film is much more impartial in view of the fact that it presents the plot mainly through a sequence of images. Therefore, people may have quite different experiences in reading a novel and seeing a film. For instance, in reading Chapter 3 of Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1856), it is not difficult to spot other people's and the author's attitude toward Darcy through her choice of words in her description, such as "disgust", "proud", "disagreeable", "unworthy", etc. However, it is far from enough for the audiences to grasp this through Darcy's cold facial

expression or even from the chat between Elizabeth and Charlotte presented by the film. When people see the scene and his action, they may have their own judgment about Darcy instead of being influenced too much by the author. In another sense, it also well explains that the novel can well reveal the people's inner world while the film can only present the surface.

#### 1.4 Time

There is a need to introduce two concepts first before discussing the time difference: One is *fabula*, which is "the raw material of the narrative", that is, the events or happenings of a narrative and the other is *sjuzet*, which is "the representation of that action in a discourse" (Lodge, 1996), such as a novel discourse or a film discourse, etc., in other words, the way of presenting events. Although an action may happen once in the *fabula*, it may happen many times in the *sjuzet*. In the novel, an action may be described again and again through deliberate choices of different words either depending on different characters' voices or the different situations, whereas the film may easily repeat the actions by means of flashback or replay. According to Lodge (1996, p.211), "most narrative discourses are shorter in duration than the sequence of actions they represent", that is, the actions in the *fabula*. But the film has much more flexibility in lengthening real time or accelerating tempo of events by using slow-motion and the device of the cut respectively. However, there is also a formal constraint on the film. A film can usually last 2 hours or so, even though the novel could be long enough to make the readers take weeks or months to read, or even so short in length which only takes several minutes. Therefore, when a novel is adapted to a film, the story needs to be condensed or even sometimes the plots be recreated.

## 2. IMPLICATIONS FOR USING FILM AND VIDEO IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

As discussed above, there are many differences between the novel and the film in terms of image, sound, point of view, and time, etc.. But, on the other hand, they supplement each other. If wisely used, they could be very helpful in our teaching. However, it heavily depends on the needs of the target students and the teacher's flexibility in designing activities. It is necessary for the teacher to choose some materials that suit students' interest and language level. When integrating the two forms of media, it is not enough to show the film or video only in language teaching class, it is also necessary to guide students to make a link between the written text and the visual scene and help them to develop various abilities. Here, based on their differences, I would venture to suggest some uses for film and video in language teaching as follows:

### 2.1 Using Film and Video to Aid Students' Literacy

Given that the film, with its beautiful settings and vivid images, is more immediately and easily attractive and entertaining than the text, students can become more motivated in seeing a film than reading a novel. Moreover, as discussed earlier, the sound, such as music or noises may also help students' understanding and make them absorbed. In this sense, the film can serve as a good tool in aiding students' literacy, especially for the students of lower-intermediate level, or even the beginners. Montgomery (1992, p.192) argues that film is a kind of medium that ensures "easy intelligibility", which we could make the most of in language teaching. In class, the teacher may select some clips of film that suit students' language level, in which, for example, there may not be too many difficult words or too complicated sentences. Theoretically, it would be better to let students read the text first before showing them the film because, as mentioned earlier, the arbitrary relationship of words to reality leaves students more space of imagination. However, if the target students are in a really low level and cannot even read fluently by themselves, the teacher may alternatively introduce the plot of the story first and give them some time to imagine the scene before showing the clips of film so as not to risk the danger of constraining students' thinking due to the immediacy and directness of film. Considering the amount of language input and the time limit, the selected clips of film may not be too long. In class, the teacher may show the clips several times. There could be no caption on the screen during the first showing, while the caption or the script of the clips should be provided for the second time so that students can make a link between the written form of words and the vocal sound with help of the images on the screen. Imitation could be adopted to help students familiarize with the words. Or even further, the students could be asked to read the script without referring to the screen. In the follow-up activity, the teacher may pick up some important words from the clips and check students' understanding. The usage of the words could be checked by asking them to make up sentences by using the words. A variation of this is to show the students another sequence of film, pick up some sentences involving some of the words and check whether they could understand them or not.

### 2.2 Focusing on Non-verbal Language

Non-verbal language is of great importance in communication and is what we cannot acquire through reading the novel. As commented by Stempleski & Tomalin (1990), non-verbal language is "as eloquent as what we actually say". So, in language teaching, we'd better take advantage of the visual signs of the film and create some opportunities for students to decode

the non-verbal language in class so as to help develop their communicative ability. In selecting materials, the sequences of film with clear body language and facial expressions are preferred. The teacher may flexibly use different techniques based on them. In view of the fact that the sound and the vision are separate components in the film, the technique of sound-off could be a good choice. When playing the sequence, the teacher may have the sound off and leave students with only the visual thing to interpret. In organizing activities, the teacher may ask students to explain what the characters do in the film or give out the main idea of the sequence. To motivate and engage students, the teacher may also adopt the form of role play, asking students to act out the sequence based on their memory and according to their understanding, etc. As discussed earlier, the film, compared with the novel, has much more flexibility in lengthening or shortening real time. The teacher, therefore, could, taking the best of this advantage in playing the sequence, speeding up or slowing down the film to make the body movements more pronounced so that the students can have a good observation. More challengingly, the students could be encouraged to do dubbing if they have the necessary sophistication and language competence. "Dubbing", in Loneragan's (1984, p.77) words, "implies altering the original sound track of a video film" and replace it with "audio recordings made by the learners or the teacher". But, in my view, asking students to do the dialogue when viewing the film in class could be more motivating and more effective, considering the students' interest and involvement in class. No matter what kind of activity is adopted, the ultimate end is to engage students, creating a good atmosphere for them to learn knowledge in pleasure and entertainment and enhancing their ability in daily communication. This could really be flexibly handled according to the needs and levels of the target students.

### 2.3 Encouraging Students to Make Video by Themselves

Video or film is "immediate" (Montgomery, 1992, p.197) and thus leaves little space for students to imagine, which seems not good for the students' creativity. Here, I would argue, if wisely used, this medium could become a helpful tool in students' personal development, in which case, encouraging students to make video by themselves could serve as a good example. In language teaching, the teacher could wisely combine video-making with the novel text, taking the best of the both. For example, before asking students to make a video, the teacher may first inform them of the plot of the novel and ask them to recommend some candidates among their classmates that best suit the characters. In this process, the students have to use their critical thinking (Candlin, Charles, & Willis, 1986). Additionally, the students have to work out a script in their own words according to the plot and have a careful design about the non-verbal language before putting on the screen.

For each step, there could be a question mark in their mind: How to choose the language and why should dress like this rather than that? Does the setting or the sound help achieve the theme? etc. In class, the original video could be shown and a comparison is necessary to be made between the self-made one and the original in terms of words, non-verbal language, the setting or even the sounds, etc. Students' attention could be drawn to the cultural differences, as well. Students are allowed to challenge the original if they could provide enough reasons. Encouraging students to make a video themselves takes time and is challenging in a way but motivating (Sherman, 2003) and rewarding. In such a process, not only could students' language ability be improved, their imagination, creativity, and critical thinking could also be developed.

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## CONCLUSION

Many films are based on novels. However, there are many differences between them in the way of telling stories. This paper highlights the differences between novel and film in terms of image vs. words, sound vs. silence, point of view, and time, etc.. The novel is arbitrary in indicating a relationship, but seems to be more oblique in its relationship to reality, thus leaving more room to imagine. It displays more points of view to present a story but seems to be less objective than the film. The film could duplicate sounds in real life, which, accompanied by the moving light on the screen, can more easily resonate with the audience. Compared with the novel, film has much more flexibility in lengthening real time or accelerating tempo of events. Differences between novel and film make them supplement each other in some way. If wisely used, they do help language teaching. In light of their different features, this paper puts forward some constructive uses for film and video in language teaching, such as using film and video to aid students' literacy, focusing on non-verbal language, and encouraging students to make video by themselves, etc.. Some activities have been suggested for each use. It is also highly advocated that the selection of film or video, and the design of activities should be done according to the different target students' interests and specific needs.

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